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ABSTRACT

Problems and needs specific to learning disabled (LD) adults are examined, and considerations for planning events for LD adults are discussed. Four questions are addressed: Does the event really meet their needs? How can one attract their attention and get them there? What kind of structure should one provide in an event? and How can one meet their unique perceptual and cognitive needs? Among the problem areas considered are the neurological problem of an attention deficit; strong feelings against parentalization; and limitations in money, time, and energy. Several needs of LD adults are pointed out and suggestions for meeting those needs are offered, including reduction of stress through relaxation techniques, better employment opportunities through training in job skills, and improved self concept through group activities. The author also mentions methods for contacting LD adults, solutions to travel problems, locations for the event, structure of the event, and use of strong perceptual modalities and a combination of methods to reach the LD individual. A planning events checklist concludes the paper. (SB)

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"PLANNING EVENTS FOR LD ADULTS"

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Planning Events for LD Adults

It is easy to make false assumptions in planning for LD people just as has happened in teaching. And too, the LD group is so heterogeneous in problems, needs and solutions that what is a problem or need for one is no problem for others. This report attempts to dispel only some of the possible assumptions one may enter into a plan for LD adults. With knowledge of the individuals involved adjustment can be made accordingly. Better planning will help one to overcome some of these assumptions.

A planner might start by asking four basic questions and examining the answers with the particular situation and individuals involved. Answers to some of these questions can dispel assumptions. They serve as guidelines like road signs that steer you in the right direction. In raising such questions one then is open to consider the many answers and solutions involved. Likewise, in this report some answers and solutions are suggested. One must weigh and judge its appropriateness. Basic to planning events for LD adults are considerations of the following: (1) Does it really meet their needs? (2) How can one attract their attention and get them there? (3) What kind of structure should one provide in an event? (4) How can one meet their unique perceptual and cognitive needs? These are similar to considerations raised in planning many events like a ACLD Council Meeting. Additional solutions can be found in such experiences, but one should not let such experiences lead one to jump to conclusions in planning events for LD adults either. Both planning situations can be guides for each other

though they are not alike. The prime question to examine is: "Does it really meet their needs?" Answers to the other three questions hinge upon this question.

The neurological problem of an attention deficit is of primary importance in considering whether an event meets their needs. The LD adult still has attention deficit problems. Their environment with efficient screening of unnecessary stimuli is many times like a carnival environment. They are prone to "zing" out or fatigue with prolonged intense stimulus. Heavy demands to perform with their inefficient skills within such an environment is inappropriate. It is suggested that events be low key in noise, flashing lights, busyness, crowds, movement and variety. However, such things are a part of getting people together. Depending upon the intensity and length, solutions can be found in quiet escapes, rest periods and allowing the LD person to gauge or pace themselves. One need not overwhelm the LD adult at an event designed for him. It is not good hospitality manners to exhaust his coping resourcefulness in setting him up to have more problems. This does not meet his needs. He has already had too many painful experiences with events that do him in. Unless there is a good payoff involved with the event the LD person may tend to reject such events that would seem like great opportunities to other people. The most common failing of an event is that it is perceived as being more harmful than helpful. The planner needs to build in assurances of help with this attention deficit problem. Engineering an event to minimize the result in overcharging is the key to a successful event. One can serve

the LD needs by not overwhelming him into such an overcharged situation.

Another sensitive area is how the leadership or power is perceived. Many LD people, especially if they are independent, do not like to be parentalized. One can rationalize this feeling because of possibly memories of leftover authority figures forcing them into molds they do not fit, or maybe they are over compensating dependency feelings with overindependency. Strong feelings about parentalization may even lead some to perceive the situation as parentalization when it may not be. Some LD people feel antagonistic toward authority figures that hold stakes in their well being. They respect them, in perhaps over awe, while at the same time find them threatening. Role of authority intervention needs to be minimized as a solution to such reaction. One can get the LD people involved in planning and self leadership if there are such reliable talents available. One can also play down titles and aristocratic type traditions. An event that an LD perceives himself as lesser than thou in a childlike relationship does not meet the needs of LD people. Such feelings may be reactionary from bad memories and low self-esteem. But it is worthwhile to minimize such a reaction for some of the more independent LD people.

A third problem area is pragmatic. LD people have limitations of money, time and energy. LD people are often fringe citizens with low or no income. Many simply cannot afford membership, travel and food, never mind motels, phone bills, and other donations of the heart. The dollar has to stretch just for the necessities. Many times families are still

supporting them. They often try not to lean on the family, thus they tend not to ask for their help while going without participation in what they need. If they are lucky enough to be working, they are caught up with the job and adult responsibilities. Time off from work or school isn't realistic. They don't risk losing a job, failing a course, or upsetting a boss or teacher even more to ask for time off. They compensate for the weaknesses as being model employees and students. That means always being there. For many reasons it is difficult to get LD people to take a day off. Therefore, Saturday and Sunday events are more realistic. Being LD with adult responsibilities means always having to catch up or over compensate to hide weaknesses.

The lack of time to do things is sometimes real rather than an excuse. It takes some LD people longer to accomplish something. Time slots are indeed filled up with all that needs to be done to support, feed and dress one's self as well as many times their families. Many feel guilty even to take the time from the many "shoulds" to enjoy some recreation or companionship. It is as if their prospective is one sided in order to look more normal, but this is all at the expense of pleasure. Some even feel they don't deserve pleasure. One may have to deal with their workaholic tendencies first so that they feel that it is okay to attend an event. One may have to help the person get in touch with his guilt trips and help him feel like he deserves such breaks.

A major problem is the lack of energy. So much is already expended in the job of keeping up that little is left over for other things. Extra energy expenditure for an extra activity

may not be the top priority as far as meeting their needs. It does take energies to go out and brave a new stimulating environment. It does take energies to drive to get there, risking the fear of getting lost or having a car break down and feeling helpless again. It does take energies to try to socialize and keep a smile on the face in spite of low self-esteem. Also, one may notice apparent enthusiasm that quickly wanes as some burn themselves out quickly from over exuberance and over enthusiasm, or they take on more than they can cope with and fall out from sight quickly. What one expects as far as energy expenditure must be realistic in proportion to what they will gain from the event. Too much energy expectations does not meet their needs.

One needs to weigh factors of gain versus loss of LD people's functioning resources. Minus factors of cost in energy and coping expenditures and what it will take from one's keeping up adult responsibilities needs to be weighed against what is in it for them. What is the payoff? Obviously, with their extra LD and related problems the payoff has to be pretty good. Payoff, of course, is meeting the needs in the sense of emotional gains and self-betterment. The risk of participating needs to look like it is worth it.

First they have got to want what you offer. But what is it that they want? Most often they want an opportunity for something that they have limited access to. Thus, the scarcity rule applies. If one can provide what they need that they don't have much, one's event will be more appealing.

Most often the LD wants hope. He wants hope that things will get better. He wants a satisfactory job and/or schooling,

and he wants self-esteem and he wants real friends. Being LD means living with a lot of stress. One feels a lot of stress from unsatisfactory employment, or role or unwanted dependency. One feels stress from a poor self-concept and of being lonely. Appeal to one or all of these areas meets the needs of the LD adults.

To help reduce stress and give hope that things will get better one can offer relaxation, stress reducing techniques and laugh therapy. The LD adult needs experiences and information on how to cope, change or eliminate stress aggravators like in diet, allergies and over charging reactions. Sometimes their just knowing that they are not the only one with such problems, or that there are others worse off than themselves helps to reduce the negative stigmas of being different. It's okay just to relax together and enjoy music and art or other forms of expressions. A formal lecture or verbage may not be the best way to reach LD adults. Time out for enjoyment may meet more needs of scarce experiences.

To help one with better employment or schooling LD adults need hope of opportunities. They need to learn job skills, job confidence and interviewing skills. They want a chance to prove themselves and they want to work up to their I.Q. potential rather than their weak area level. They want job security as well. In other words, they want to be productive full fledged members of the society. Events that open doors to a chance to this is welcomed. They may want training in setting up their own business, side stepping the possibility of put downs from a boss. They may want to meet employers or

see what is involved in jobs. They may want to brain storm problems and solutions in employment and school, or they may want to figure out why they lost their jobs or failed a course or succeeded and compare the situations. They want to hear of school programs and how to overcome the red tape that seems overwhelming to them. Many are not aware that it is even financially possible. They do not know about basic grants for education nor how to fill out the forms. Younger ones vacillate with wants (or needs) for more basic information in reaching independence. They may need to learn how to manage a checking account, meal preparation, clothes buying and the necessities of surviving on one's own. Some LD's at this stage may not be sure of themselves in leaving home and need more success experiences where their interest lies, usually this is in social needs. More opportunities are needed.

LD people need friends. Those who do not compensate with charisma and social grace tend to be lonely people with few acquaintances and fewer pals. With feelings of inferiority many LD's are wall flowers and difficult to find or get involved in social things. Many miss subtle body language or are unaware of their own socially unacceptable mannerisms. Some touch too much or over respond from touch and pull back in body language that other people interpret as dislike. They misinterpret others as well. Often communication skills are poor. In their attempt to look like normal they still show many social subtle problems. They need more and better experiences of socializing in an understanding and somewhat protective environment. They need honest feedback of their behaviors.

In such an environment one can gain confidence in themselves and go beyond his limited circle of friends and find new ones. Within groups LD adults can feed off of and bounce back from those like himself. Among his new LD friends he can find out that he is okay after all. Everyone, especially people with bad social experiences, needs supportive friends in a supportive environment. LD adults need friends.

Self-esteem and self-concept is often negative. Events that foster one's feeling about himself are needed. This is the most versatile area to meet the LD adults' needs. It is probably the most needed in the long run as well. LD adults are tired of put downs and failure experiences and being eliminated out. They need experiences that build them up, help give them success feeling and include them in the mainstream of action. At the same time one need not over charge or over demand or take more energy than is gained. LD adults benefit immensely if they can participate within a known structure. There are many ways one can be a part of things with some importance. If the expectation is within a predictable or short time frame, over charging and fear of failure will be minimal. They can have the honor of being on panel, present a talk, have input to committees, be a research subject, write out life stories or experiences, be on radio or T.V. talk shows, talk to clinics, learning labs and rehabs as experts of living with LD or the like. One can also receive recognition for a project of self-improvement. For instance, few would recognize one learning how to drive a car or pass a course or overcoming a problem of employment that comes easy for most

people but is a great achievement for LD people. Yet, they too need recognition, models of encouragement, and pushes for further improvement through positive means. One can get a picture in the paper or council news or receive a certificate or plague or honorable mention, as well. Group activities where LD's can feed off of one another is most highly recommended. One can plan a think tank or brain storming session with coping ideas, problems, needs or solutions. An LD person can feel like he is needed as a worthwhile person with a role to help others. He can be given a job, responsibility, or title, small or big roles alike, any help. An initiative with a purpose needs to be encouraged. For instance, one can have such titles as: Newsletter Artist, Tape Technician, Editor Assistant, Area Coordinator or Contact Person, Program Planner, Secondary Committee Representative, Introduction Announcer, LD Adult Participant, Advocacy Leader, Handicap Group Liaison, Speaker's Bureau Electe, Transportation Engineer, Official Phoner, LD Adult Membership Chairman, Self-Help Group Treasurer & Secretary are just a few of the possibilities depending on situations as they arise. Such labels help define the person's job and who he is just as employment does. Titles increase the likelihood of success in that job as it makes it more concrete and real to the person. The job is more likely to be done well and in dignity. One can have ribbons or buttons of such recognitions at conventions. Other group identifiers can make LD adult coherents more real. The group could wear LD adult T-shirts, elect a group moto or a theme song. For instance, "nobody's perfect" and "I am the perfect example" or "I will survive" from the song, "I Will Survive". Chances to display creative talents of art, music, mechanics and

working with people are gold mine opportunities. The LD adult can express himself in the means he is best at in contrast to academic skills. One can have an arts and crafts fair or displays or an LD band or talent show depending on the make-up of the people's talents. A service to LD children could be presented. They could have a Big Brother-Big Sister program, do tutoring trade-offs or set up a penpal program. These maybe areas where they can express their ability to help and work with people. A planner can structure the atmosphere to maximize the positive and minimize the negative. For instance, one could hold a mini conference along with or without one's state conference, but one could hold it in a lounge atmosphere or one may plan a retreat or outdoor activities where less LD problems are posed in such atmospheres. There are pros to holding self-help rap groups in the intimacy of private homes in contrast to meeting rooms or within council meetings. Many of the above ideas can be instituted within the context of social events rather than formal events.

In summary, one can engineer chances of real big payoffs that makes events successful for LD adults. Recognition costs nothing but an audience and time. Yet, it is a wonderful reward and positive stroke that pushes LD people on for more action that wins them even more rewards and positive strokes.

Once needs are identified, a planner of LD events needs to deal with the question of how can one attract their attention and get them involved. Some of this question has already been answered in theory with examining the previous facets of what are their needs. Now one needs to reach people by advertising

and contacting in an appealing format. It is like taking a good product in demand and selling it. One needs to increase the likelihood that the word gets out to more people. The word needs to include payoffs and the securities from a failure experience. They need to be obvious within the first impression by more people. One deals with similar problems, as in sales in answering the questions in how one can attract their attention and get them involved.

Some methods of contact are better than others. Personal contact is the best means, as in sales. This is not always possible. Telephoning is next best but costly if long distance and if it is local, phone calls an hour or two before the event increases attendance a great deal. This is highly recommended. It helps people with memory problems and reinforces the idea that the person is wanted. Tapes can be used. Letters have worked for more involved higher functioning people. Distance and economy limits the best contact methods.

One can find LD people through T.V. and radio talk shows, newspaper ads and datebook listings, schools, adult education, English and other teachers, mental health people and clinics, but most often one finds LD people from friends in talking about LD people in older people and through ACLD parents of grown-up children and ACLD members themselves. There are also networks of organized LD adults throughout the country. ACLD has a youth and adult section. Though many LD people tend to be hidden in a hidden handicap and shy away as wall flowers, they are coming out; and they can be found by seeking out people who are working with them with their problems. First

impressions are most important. It is easier to say, "No", as many do to the many bombardments. LD adults tend to react negatively. The situation maybe interpreted as threatening. An LD person may respond with a "so what", a line of excuses, or "There's nothing wrong with me". Much of the negative reaction is a fear response, especially fears around travel. Some will worry if their old "clunker" cars will make it or if they will find gas, get arrested for speeding or have a blow out. Some fear failure on the road, or they fear new places. Some fear not finding the streets, parking, elevator and room. They fear failure in their directional perceptual problems in getting lost. Some fear being late or having the wrong time or date as they have in the past from time concept and reversal problems. Some get motion sickness to the extent where they are set up to act more LD and continue to experience the sensation of motion and its stress responses. They cannot fully enjoy what they have traveled to. It is easier just to say "no" rather than expose themselves to such fears and failures.

Solution to travel problems may be car pooling, busing and close activities, as well as easy to get to and find, and consistent places. Direction problems can be reduced with maps. People function best with different forms of directions. Give directions by both north, east, south, west and left and right including descriptions of milestones like brand gas stations or odd shaped or colored buildings outside, or stairs, doors and lobbies or what have you inside. Explicit detailed directions that takes the person from the address to parking to the room

is appreciated. Many assumptions can be left open without taking the person through the steps, not too unlike what you would do with a blind person. As one insures them of meeting their needs, resistance is lowered. What's in it for them must be obvious and secure. A good policy is to ask them to go just once and if they don't like it, they don't have to go again. Once they see what goes on and feels good about it, less prodding is necessary.

Some turn-offs for individuals have been expressed by the place of the event. One may dislike meeting there or avoid the following: schools - especially in classrooms (some report bad memories), Mental Health Agencies (some report, "I wouldn't be caught dead being seen going into a place like that."), conferences (scarces them, sounds stuffy and heady and makes them feel inferior), workshops (sounds like it is for professionals and they feel left out), raps (what's a rap?- sounds threatening). LD adults will respond favorably if they see the situation as helpful.

Part of the question has already been answered to what kind of structure should one provide in an event. However, a planner needs to juggle with some kinds of structure that helps as well as balance it with kinds of structure that harms. One deals with structure but not structure to best meet the needs of LD people. In general one needs to give structure that facilitates predictability while not trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. Structure should neither corner them into LD problems or patronize them while they do allow choice and individual control.

Many LD adults prefer more information of the event, the environment, facilities and supplies needed than one may assume. Just as they need more details in a variety of formats in giving directions to get them there, they need more specifics about what they have to deal with. For instance, schedules and agendas help them pre-plan steps they need to go through, organize supplies in order needed, and get the sequence of ideas they will need to wrestle with all outside of the charged situation at home. They can then rehearse through the steps of what will be demanded on them. They find that within the charged situation with this homework, they can function better as they flow with a pre-plan. Things seem more in order and they are functioning with greater confidence. Even more information will be necessary for overnight or longer events. For instance, they may feel even greater insecurities in maintaining basics of food, clothing and shelter. They may need extra insurances in the form of information that all is manageable. Since some have special diets, consideration of healthful food choices and high protein snacks available is appreciated. Listing of a store nearby gives them a sense of control over their well being. Packing can be more sensible if one supplies a list of needed things, gives the weather and temperature conditions, mentions perhaps that a laundermat is available. Otherwise, with possible insecurities and over compensations one may be packing too much for just in case or within distractions leave out essentials. A description of shelter and sleeping arrangements will ease one's worst fears of inappropriate

rest. In providing such extra information one needs to avoid local or confusing terminology like a washteria, quick stops, galoshes and sneakers. One needs to be careful with word choice in giving information specifics. Listing of an emergency telephone number and contact person's name will be very helpful so that if they do get into a bind, they know where to go for help. Sometimes in a state of panic they don't think that out very clearly. In other words, one needs to examine the full picture of the event and try to fill in the empty holes of assumptions.

The more information one provides that aids prediction and rehearsal, the better. Readiness and exercises are a key to LD's being successful. Some may need to be taught to rehearse, play role, predict, and put all in order before the event. Some do homework of list or chart making. Others rewrite out their schedules or over learn them to be able to function better in the situation. Consistency of places and scheduling reduces the need of relearning. Some find color coding or underlining specifics as well as numbering the sequences helpful. Some organize by space and others by time. In other words, LD adults need a chance to be resourceful and prepare for the event to prevent problems. LD adults can compensate with their disorganization and overwhelmingness problems with confidence and full control if they have a chance. Added information given before the event will give them a tool to do this for them.

One need not provide too much structure where LD adults feel child like or cornered into ill functioning situations by lack of choice. One need not lecture to them what they

should take and why, but rather one should make a simple suggested list. For other examples, one may not want to lead LD adults around in groups or with a guide or list a bed time. Some may become angered by such structure. Insisting that all participate in a manadatory group activity is ill advised. Also, one must not over structure where there is no breathing room for a change because of enthusiasm or energy levels. Some activities should encourage individualism, allowing their freedom of movement and coming and going and choice for such problems of hyperactivity, nervousness, overcharging, fatigues, and perceptual conceptual problems. Structure needs to be with enough elements of preinformation and but yet, enough freedom to allow self-pacing and self-control. Insisting that the LD person does it a particular way sets the stage for LD problems as it did in school under the teacher's way rather than the way that is best for the person's individual needs.

Much of the fourth question has already been dealt with in the unfolding of the others. How can one meet their unique perceptual cognitive needs? In meeting such needs one follows the same principles and general techniques as used in Special Ed classes. It is assumed that the reader is already familiar with such methodology and deficits involved so solutions for LD events will be briefly mentioned. Just as in teaching, one should use the strong perceptual modalities and use the combination of methods to reach the LD person. In other words one uses a variety of modalities using the visual, auditory, the kinesthetic and the tactile. This process can be reinforced by having what is said also shown in a pictoral form through a

variety of AV or audio visual presentations. One can also present outlines of the contents and main ideas. One can allow body movement or alternate seating. Some prefer to be up front where they can read the faces. Others prefer to be in the back where they can stand up or follow along with others. Floor sitting in a circle has been very successful as well. They may need tactile reinforcement through underlining the ideas as they are covered or leaving spaces with the outlines or a chart area for their own notes and input. The different methods of presentation will vary by the kind of event, but one should not present just something in talk or on a written paper but present it in several ways. We also have to allow different time spans for many LD people. Some need more time to express themselves as they are inefficient with self-expression. Some are slow processors and need just a little bit more time to deal with the words before they understand what is going on. Most prefer a little bit of orientation time in the room or getting to know the leader before there is verbal and content bombardment. They also need time to get use to the person's voice who will be speaking. There needs to be a balance of talk with activity and application. One needs to be versatile to meet both the fast and the slow processor's need to get a great deal out of the event. This can be gained through shorter talks,with breaks or different kinds of activities. One also needs to reduce distractions and extra stimulus by simple things of closing doors and being away from noise and traffic. Florescent

lights maybe also determental. Cognitive problems can be engineered out of the situation and are unnecessary. People have problems focusing in on the right thing but can be resteered into the main idea through pointers and AV and use of outlines or underlining as they go. They also not only have trouble focusing but have problems in switching gears in on the concept which is being dealt with. They maybe still back on the original idea that was started with and didn't flow with the content. Switching gears can be facilitated through use of outlines and having the person follow the outline. Some abstractions and terminology may get in the way of understanding, and one must be ready to explain interpretations that they may take too literal. It is better to present main ideas in short simple phrases rather than in a paragraph or writing up a paper on a certain subject. This way they don't have to deal with as much reading or words and still get the idea. The format of the subject matters is best if they are divergent and of a creative nature where they have an opportunity to have input. Like, for instance, in a brain storm on a subject matter. For instance, if you want to do a subject which could be normally presented to people on how to get a job, it would be better to rephrase it to "Ways of Job Getting", and then open up the subject matter for their involvement. If one wants to have a activity of public relations activity planning it would be better to present it as "Ways of Changing Attitudes", then get their input and motivation of going ahead and carrying out the activity.

If one wants a subject matter of how to cope with LD rephrasing it into, "Solutions to Coping" allows an open ended discussion and opens it to the floor. Open ended subjects with group involvement have proved to be much more successful with LD adults.

In summary, one can plan events and have some successes. Yet, with the same energies one can plan events with LD adults' needs and special problems in mind for a real success. This success breeds more success for the LD adult. These will be events that adults can grow with and everybody gains by such growth. Meeting their needs of gaining hope and opportunity can be planned into an event without overwhelming them. One can examine the four questions and create a positive experience that all would want to come back and repeat.

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